

# Cyberbullying

*By Lynn Trimble*

Plenty of parents remember their own childhood experiences with bullying – cruel comments penciled onto bathroom walls, snide remarks hurled amidst banks of lockers, not-so-nice notes passed between classmates.

Today's bullies have a whole new universe from which to work their hurtful ways. Bullying has gone high-tech.

"Cyberbullying is sending or posting harmful or cruel text or images using the Internet or other digital communication devices," according to Nancy Willard, M.S., J.D., director of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use in Oregon. Cyberbullying can take many forms, including those noted by Willard in her guides for parents and educators (available at [cyberbully.org](http://cyberbully.org)):

- Flaming. Sending angry, rude or vulgar messages to someone privately or through an online group.
- Harassment. Repeatedly sending someone offensive messages.
- Cyberstalking. Harassment that is extremely intimidating or includes threats of harm.
- Denigration. Sending or posting harmful, untrue or cruel statements about others.
- Masquerading. Pretending to be someone else while sending or posting material that makes someone look bad or puts someone in danger.
- Outing. Sending or posting sensitive, private or embarrassing information (such as forwarding private messages or photos).
- Trickery. Using tricks to get personal information and making it public.
- Exclusion. Intentionally excluding someone from an online group or instant messaging "buddies" list.

Cyberbullying is best prevented by parent involvement and supervision, according to Terry Goddard, Arizona Attorney General and the father of a young son. Pay careful attention to how your

children are using technology – including desktop or laptop computers, digital cameras, scanners, handheld devices, phones that record digital images and other tools of the 21st century. "These tools are a big convenience, but they can be a tremendous source of harassment."

Encourage your child's school to educate teachers, students and families about the dangers of cyberbullying. "The more sophisticated school programs can reduce offender activity by 50 percent," says Goddard. Schools should work to raise awareness of cyberbullying, provide warnings about serious consequences for perpetrators, closely supervise and monitor technology use and develop action plans for prompt and proper responses. Once a majority of kids get educated about the issue and decide they're not going to participate, cyberbullying loses much of its popularity and appeal with the remaining few.

When cyberbullying is ignored or goes unchecked, it can escalate, with dire consequences ranging from school truancy or school failure to suicide or violence toward others (by either the perpetrators or the victims).

Educators must be prepared to notify law enforcement officials if needed, says Willard. This is especially true when cyberbullying includes the following:

- threats of property damage, violence or death
- excessive intimidation or extortion
- threats or intimidation that involves bias or discrimination based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or other factors
- any type of sexual exploitation

“Cyberbullying may also meet legal standards for what are called intentional torts (wrong doings),” observes Willard. These include defamation (publishing a false damaging statement, harming a victim’s reputation in the community), invasion of privacy (disclosing non-public and highly offensive details, placing a person in a false light before the public) and intentional infliction of emotional distress (when reckless, outrageous and intolerable actions cause extreme distress).

At home, work to educate your tweens and teens about cyberbullying and its ramifications. Make it safe for them to tell you if they are being victimized. If your child is victimized, you may be able to limit or reduce cyberbullying by taking the following steps, suggested by Willard:

- Contact your Internet service provider, forward messages and request that the account in question be terminated.
- Notify involved websites and request removal of inappropriate content.
- Contact the phone company and trace the phone number of origin.
- Use a filtering or block function for e-mail, instant messaging and mobile phones.
- Use a filtering function for e-mail to preserve important evidence.
- Change your phone number and/or e-mail address.

Contact local law enforcement officials if cyberbullying becomes dangerous or extreme, adds Goddard.

Don’t wait to educate yourself about these issues. Today’s kids are too tied to technology for parents to assume that cyberbullying will never cross their path. “Cyberbullying has been below the radar screen for too long,” says Goddard. “It’s time we change that.”